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Military Lessons Learned by Israel and Syria From the War in Lebanon

Interagency Intelligence Memorandum

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MILITARY LESSONS LEARNED
BY ISRAEL AND SYRIA
FROM THE WAR IN LEBANON

Information available as of 19 April 1984 was
used in the preparation of this Memorandum.

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SCOPE NOTE

The purpose of this Interagency Intelligence Memorandum is to evaluate the military lessons by Israel and Syria from the 1982 war in Lebanon and their potential impact on the military balance between them. It does not attempt to analyze the overall Arab-Israeli military balance

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[redacted] It concentrates instead on the two most likely adversaries in the Arab-Israeli arena over the next five years and evaluates their performance in Lebanon and subsequent force improvements to assess their relative military capabilities.

This Memorandum was produced under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia. It was coordinated at the working level with the Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organizations of the Army, Navy, and Air Force.

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KEY JUDGMENTS

Israel drew few major military lessons from the 1982 war in Lebanon. Tactical innovations, equipment modifications, and doctrinal changes were validated, and some relatively minor weaknesses were noted. Major lessons, however, are not normally drawn from minor wars, and some Israeli tactics used in Lebanon would not be appropriate for open warfare on the Golan Heights. Similarly, the Syrians may not consider lessons learned from Lebanon relevant to a battle on the Golan Heights.

The war nevertheless marked the first time Israeli and Syrian forces have engaged in pitched battles since 1973 and thus provides a framework from which to measure and project relative capabilities. Since the 1973 war, Israel has concentrated primarily on qualitative improvements in its armed forces. Syria has generally emphasized quantity, but the war in Lebanon spurred Syrian plans to upgrade, as well as expand the size of, its armed forces.

Despite the rapid expansion and modernization of the Syrian armed forces, Israel will maintain its margin of military superiority and probably widen the gap over the next five years. Damascus may be able to achieve its goal of parity, but only in numbers. Israel's greater operational effectiveness, its possession of better weapons and their subsystems, and its acquisition and integration of advanced command, control, and intelligence systems will offset most Syrian improvements.

Israeli policymakers may have learned a major lesson, however, on the importance of national consensus and unity in fighting a protracted war. Lebanon marked the first time the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) experienced refusal of duty by a significant number of reservists and large antiwar demonstrations by the civilian populace. The overall mission of the IDF in Lebanon was never clearly defined, and Israel's inability to extricate itself from the Lebanese quagmire with any political advantage has called into question the fundamental premise that has guided Israel's concept of a defense force: Israel goes to war only when there is no choice and only to defend the state. Israeli governments in future will have to be careful to ensure national consensus before resorting to force and avoid using the IDF solely for political objectives if they are to keep a strong citizen army.

The Syrian military, despite relatively high losses, believes its ground forces performed reasonably well and would have done better if

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the air and air defense forces had not failed. The Syrians are attempting to correct problems in command and control, training, and their ability to employ and maintain weapons incorporating advanced technology. The Syrians, however, blame their massive defeat on the Soviet weapons they used and not on their operation of them—an attitude that suggests the problems are not being properly addressed. The specter of a two-front war in Lebanon and the Golan Heights prodded the Syrians to implement plans for corps-level commands and to significantly increase the size of the standing Army; they have devoted little attention, however, to developing and implementing a joint-service and combined-arms doctrine to utilize these forces effectively.

Moscow's need to repair ties with Damascus after Syria's defeat was more of a factor in determining the increase in Soviet military support than Syria's need for any particular weapon system. The most conspicuous component of Soviet support has been [redacted] SA-5 surface-to-air missile units in Syria and delivery of SS-21 surface-to-surface rocket launchers. This equipment has not been delivered to any country outside the Warsaw Pact and, though of marginal value to the Syrian armed forces, demonstrates a strategic commitment on Moscow's part to Syria's defense.

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The Soviets nevertheless have been working hard with the Syrian air and air defense forces to improve their capabilities and have equipped them with such items as new radars, new fighter-interceptors, and an automated air defense command and control system. To use this equipment effectively against their Israeli opponents, however, the Syrians must develop new tactics and doctrine [redacted] and correct command and control deficiencies.

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Over the long term, however, Syria can begin to overcome its military disadvantage primarily by improving the quality of its manpower and leadership. Qualified technical manpower is scarce, and the steady expansion of the Syrian armed forces ensures that it will remain so. Syrian military leadership depends more on religion, family connections, and political reliability than on professional expertise. Thus, the level of professionalism of the average Syrian officer is much lower than that of his Israeli counterpart.

The key element of Israel's military advantage over the Syrians is the operational effectiveness of its forces—based on superior leadership and training, greater motivation, better command and control, individual initiative, and the ability of its armed forces to exploit more fully the capabilities of weapon systems. The quality of its forces will continue to give Israel its decisive edge.

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DISCUSSION

Overview

1. Israel's invasion of Lebanon in June 1982 was the culmination of an escalatory process that began in 1976 with deployment of the Syrian-Arab Deterrent Force there. Although the invasion was triggered by the assassination attempt against the Israeli Ambassador in London [redacted]

[redacted] The growing military infrastructure of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Lebanon led Israel after 1980 to adopt a policy of preemptive rather than retaliatory strikes against PLO positions there. This policy was designed to disrupt Palestinian plans and capabilities to conduct operations. Instead it resulted in a major confrontation in July 1981 that convinced Israeli policymakers an invasion of southern Lebanon would be necessary. Syria's inability and unwillingness to control Palestinian guerrilla activity in the south and Syrian encroachment on Israel's self-proclaimed "red lines" in Lebanon led Israeli policymakers to conclude also that the Syrian presence there could not be tolerated indefinitely either.¹

2. The war's objectives were political as well as military and stemmed from a belief by Prime Minister Begin and key Cabinet members Shamir and Sharon that Syria and the PLO could be dealt a major political and military defeat in Lebanon and that an Israeli-dominated Christian Maronite government could be installed in Beirut. The objectives at the outset were:

- To secure Israel's northern border area from Palestinian rocket and artillery attacks.

¹ Israel had set "red lines" in Lebanon that Syrian forces tacitly observed but violated when Damascus felt Israel was unilaterally changing the rules. For example, Israel stipulated between 1976 and 1979 that no Syrian troops were to advance south of a line between Sidon and the southern tip of the Buhayrat al Qir'awn (reservoir), nor were Syrian artillery units to move within range of the Israeli-Lebanese border. Syria also was warned not to deploy surface-to-air missiles inside Lebanon or to interfere with Israeli reconnaissance flights. The Syrians introduced SA-6 surface-to-air missile batteries into the Bekaa Valley—a preplanned deployment triggered when Israeli aircraft downed two Syrian troop-carrying helicopters near Zahlan in 1981. Resulting tensions caused the Syrians to deploy some forces south of Qir'awn to cover critical road junctions. Ironically, the "red lines" gave the PLO free rein to operate in southern Lebanon because Israel's security enclave manned by Major Hadad's forces extended only 6 kilometers into Lebanon and the mandate of the UN force (UNIFIL) limited its ability to control the Palestinians.

- To destroy the PLO's military and political infrastructure in Lebanon and by extension weaken its influence in the West Bank.
- To install a Lebanese government that would conclude a peace treaty with Israel.

An objective that emerged during the war was to engage and if possible expel Syrian military forces from Lebanon because their continued presence would leave Damascus with too much influence on any Lebanese government after the war. From a tactical standpoint, Syrian forces had to be driven at least from the Shuf and the southern Bekaa Valley, where they could offer sanctuary to PLO forces and threaten the Israeli Army's east flank.²

3. Most Israelis overwhelmingly supported the first two objectives. The armed Palestinian presence in southern Lebanon had become intolerable for Israel's northern border communities, and most Israelis viewed the growing power of the PLO in Lebanon as a serious potential threat.

4. Israel's inability to achieve its third objective has created dissension within the Israeli body politic hitherto unseen. A growing sense that Israel, despite its military victory, has become mired in a political situation that offers no hope of resolution has resulted in widespread criticism of the appropriateness of military force to achieve political gains. Syria's rapid recovery from its military defeat in June 1982, its strengthened political position in Lebanon, and the disintegration of the Maronite-dominated Lebanese government reinforce these doubts.

Joint-Service Operations

5. The invasion of Lebanon was the first real test under combat conditions of organizational changes in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) command structure made as a result of lessons learned in the 1973 war. In planning the invasion the IDF emphasized joint-

² There was a compelling strategic-military logic for besieging West Beirut apart from any political motivation for dislodging the PLO. The Israeli Army had to cut the Beirut-Damascus highway to drive a wedge between the Syrians in the east and the PLO in Beirut and facilitate a linkup with the Lebanese Forces of Bashir Gemayel. Such a wedge had to be wide enough to defend and permit domination of the Jabal al Baruk ridgeline.

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service operations under the direction of a joint staff attached to the General Headquarters (GHQ) staff.

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[REDACTED] The net effect was an effective military machine capable of quickly exploiting tactical opportunities with air support and combined-arms maneuver down to the company level. As a result the IDF defeated Syrian forces piecemeal without decisive maneuver. By contrast, the Syrians demonstrated little interservice planning, coordination, or cooperation.

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Joint-Service Logistic Operations

11. Because of Lebanon's limited and constricted road network, the IDF coordinated closely with the Navy and Air Force to move men and materiel.

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[Redacted] The Syrians did not attempt to interdict IDF supply lines in the eastern zone, so no redirection of supply and support efforts was necessary.

12. Israeli Air Force transport aircraft and heavy-lift helicopters also were used [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Thereafter, temporary airstrips built by IDF engineers were used to continue resupply operations and troop rotations at forward bases along the cease-fire lines.

Joint-Service Command, Control, and Communications

13. The strikes against Syrian surface-to-air missile sites, troop reinforcement, and command and control elements involved extensive joint-service planning and had to be precisely coordinated and controlled, particularly as Israeli forces neared Beirut. For Israeli planners the primary considerations for the command, control, and communications system were Lebanon's mountainous terrain, the constricted airspace, and the multiplicity of regular and irregular forces to be engaged.

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Conclusions

123. Despite the rapid expansion and modernization of the Syrian armed forces, Israel will maintain its margin of military superiority and probably widen the gap over the next five years. Damascus may be able to achieve its goal of parity, but only in numbers. Israel's greater operational effectiveness, its possession of better weapons and their subsystems, and its acquisition and integration of advanced command, control, and intelligence systems will offset most Syrian improvements.

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124. Major lessons are not normally drawn from minor wars, and Israel drew few of them from the 1982 war in Lebanon. At most, some tactical innovations, equipment modifications, and doctrinal changes were validated, and some relatively minor weaknesses were noted. Because of terrain and other factors, some Israeli tactics used in Lebanon would not be appropriate for open warfare on the Golan Heights.

125. Israeli policymakers may have learned a major lesson, however, on the importance of national consensus and unity in fighting a protracted war. Lebanon marked the first time the IDF experienced the refusal by a significant number of reservists to carry out their assigned duties and large demonstrations against the war by the civilian populace. The overall mission of the IDF in Lebanon was never clearly defined by the government after the 43-kilometer line was crossed. The siege of Beirut, the protracted guerrilla warfare in the south, and Israel's inability to extricate itself from the Lebanese quagmire with any political advantage has highlighted the departure of the Lebanon campaign from the fundamental premise that has guided Israel's concept of a defense force: Israel goes to war only when there is no choice and only to defend the state.

126 The Syrian military, despite relatively high losses, believes its ground forces performed reasonably well and would have done better if the air and air defense forces had not failed. The Syrians are attempting to correct problems in command and control, training, and their ability to employ and maintain weapons incorporating advanced technology. The Syrians, however, blame their massive defeat on the Soviet weapons they used and not their operation of them—an attitude that suggests the problems are not being properly addressed.

127. Despite its preference for Western equipment and training methods, Syria can do little to break away from the Soviet mold. With the likelihood of another Syrian-Israeli war, Syria cannot afford the expensive and time-consuming process of a transition to Western systems. Additionally, Syria would not be certain of obtaining full and long-term Western military support. At present the Soviet Union is Syria's only reliable source of political and military support. We expect Syrian dependence on the Soviets, particularly in the air and air defense areas, to remain at the same or higher levels for the foreseeable future.

128. The specter of a two-front war in Lebanon and the Golan Heights prodded Syrian GHQ to implement plans for corps-level commands and to significantly

increase the size of the standing army. It has devoted little attention, however, to developing and implementing a joint-service and combined-arms doctrine to utilize these forces effectively.

129. Moscow's need to repair ties with Damascus after Syria's defeat was more of a factor in determining the increase in Soviet military support than Syria's need for any particular weapon system. The most conspicuous component of Soviet support has been

[redacted] SA-5 surface-to-air missile units in Syria and delivery of [redacted] SS-21 surface-to-surface rocket launchers. This equipment has not been delivered to any country outside the Warsaw Pact, and, though of marginal value to the Syrian armed forces, demonstrates a strategic commitment on Moscow's part to Syria's defense.¹²

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131. To use this equipment effectively against their Israeli opponents, however, the Syrian armed forces must develop new tactics and doctrine. Lebanon demonstrated that sheer numbers were of marginal value on the battlefield without integration and coordination of other assets.

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Furthermore, some shortfalls will take years to correct, such as training enough pilots adequately to replace the losses from Lebanon.

132. A key element of Israel's military advantage over Syria is the operational effectiveness of its forces—based on superior leadership and training, greater motivation, better command and control, combat experience, individual initiative, and the ability of its armed forces to exploit more fully the capabilities of weapon systems. It is these factors that will enable Israeli forces to operate more effectively in a battle-

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field environment complicated by advanced technology and sophisticated weapons. Israel's successes in these areas are not likely to be substantially eroded over the next five years, despite problems resulting from manpower and budgetary constraints, and training limitations imposed by the Sinai withdrawal.

133. Aggressive and innovative leadership will be essential to a fast-moving, offensive-type war. In contrast to the Syrians, Israel's military personnel have demonstrated an ability to improvise and quickly modify operational plans in the heat of battle. Officers and noncommissioned officers are trained in contingency planning and encouraged to make decisions on the spot. Organizational flexibility and command initiative will enable Israeli military leaders to adjust forces rapidly to meet any Syrian threat.

134. Unlike Syrian military leaders, Israeli commanders rise through the ranks on the basis of demonstrated leadership, performance, and initiative. There are no direct commissions in the Israeli armed forces. Political loyalty or favoritism plays little role in personnel advancement, and assignments and promotions are based almost exclusively on merit, except at the highest levels, where personal and political factors also influence selection.

135. Israeli leadership and training will continue to be facilitated by armed forces composed of highly motivated individuals. The majority of the population is highly supportive of the armed forces and still is

prepared to endure and accept a high collective cost—in lives and in personal and economic sacrifice—to defend the country. High motivation will continue to enhance the capability of Israeli military personnel to achieve the highest level of combat readiness.

136. Over the long term Syria can begin to overcome its present military disadvantage only by improving the quality of its manpower and leadership. Qualified technical manpower is scarce, and the steady expansion of the Syrian armed forces ensures that it will remain so. The majority of Syrian conscripts are poorly educated and from a rural background. They do not have, and for the foreseeable future will not have, the same proficiency on increasingly complex weapon systems as their Israeli counterparts. The Syrian military leadership, moreover, does not exhibit the same commitment and professionalism as the Israeli. Religion, family connections, and political reliability are more important for advancement than professional expertise. The recent struggle between Rifaat Assad, commander of the Defense Companies, and his opponents in the regular Army over officer assignments suggests that at senior levels political considerations are more important than competence. As a result, Syria will continue to have a marginally proficient armed forces led by officers of questionable competence. Such a military, even if able to achieve a surprise attack and seize the Golan Heights, is unlikely to succeed in holding it or preventing a total defeat at the hands of the IDF.

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